

Transcript

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America's Mandarin (1954-1963)

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NARRATOR: America made a commitment to South Vietnam, and to its President Ngo Dinh Diem in the 1950s under President Eisenhower.

PRESIDENT NGO DINH DIEM, May 1957:

Mr. President, it is a great joy for me to be again in Washington, and a great honor to be welcomed by you. I thank you very much.

NARRATOR: By late 1963, Diem was dead, the U.S. government implicated in his downfall. This is the story of the beginning of America's war in Vietnam.

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER, 1953:

Now let us assume that we lose Indochina. If Indochina goes, several things happen right away. The Kra Peninsula, the last little bit of land hanging on down there, would be scarcely defensible. The tin and the tungsten that we so greatly value from that area would cease coming. But all India would be out-flanked. Burma would certainly, in its weakened condition, be no defense. So you see, somewhere along the line this must be blocked. It must be blocked now. Now that's what the French are doing. So when the United States votes \$400 million to help that war we're not voting for a give-away program; we're voting for the cheapest way that we can prevent the occurrence of something that would be of the most terrible significance to the United States of America. Our security!

NARRATOR: America had given France more than \$2 billion to stop the Communist-led Vietminh in Indochina.

But in 1954, after eight years of war and a hundred years of colonial rule, the French were defeated.

The Geneva cease-fire agreement imposed a temporary division of Vietnam. The French could retain their influence in the South. A Communist regime, headed by Ho Chi Minh, took over the North.

To many Vietnamese, the Vietminh were nationalist heroes, finally victorious in the long war against the French, finally in control of their capital city, Hanoi.

To America's leaders, Ho Chi Minh represented international communism directed by Moscow. And, after China's fall to the Communists only five years before, they saw Ho's victory as another threat to the West.

SECRETARY OF STATE JOHN FOSTER DULLES, March 14, 1955:

I saw everywhere that there were people who were frightened and worried at the evidence, either within their own country or in very close proximity to it, of aggressive Chinese Communist intentions. It would seem as though it was quite possible that the Chinese Communists are not content to stop until it is apparent that they are stopped by superior resistance.

NARRATOR: In the South, American hopes for building an Anti-Communist state centered on Ngo Dinh Diem, a little-known nationalist appointed Prime Minister during the Geneva Conference. Diem had disliked French rule. Now, he was inheriting their shaky bureaucracy, a demoralized army, and a capital, Saigon, seething with fierce political rivalries.

He also faced a two-year deadline. The Geneva agreements called for country-wide elections in 1956. If Ho Chi Minh won, the Communists would control all of Vietnam. The Eisenhower Administration was uncertain about Diem: could he really the southern population and stop the spread of communism?

NGO DINH LUYEN (Diem's Youngest Brother): It was the end of August 1954, a month and a half after my brother Diem had come to power. I arrived in Saigon to find that my brother couldn't count on his government workers, because everybody was panicky, completely convinced that the end was upon them. The advance, the Communist victory, would be at any moment. The government people had no intention of working. Everybody was trying to figure out how they were

going to get out of this hornet's nest.

NARRATOR: Diem had been appointed by Bao Dai, the playboy emperor picked by the French. He had few allies in South Vietnam. As austere Catholic, he had gone to America in the early 1950s and secluded himself in a New Jersey seminary. Father John Keegan.

FATHER JOHN KEEGAN: He was, well, a mysterious kind of person because we didn't know quite exactly what he was all about. He didn't seem to us to be very important. He did dishes with us, and people of importance didn't do that; students did that, or brothers did that, and here was Diem, you know, doing dishes at the tables with the rest of the students. We were impressed with his devoutness. As seminarians, we were up at five-thirty in the morning, and Diem would already be in a pew meditating, reflecting. He would attend mass every morning, you know, quite devoutly, as far as we could see, and stay afterwards and pray. It was almost as though he were living the life of a monk.

NARRATOR: By the fall of 1954, refugees from the North, most of them Catholics, were fleeing towards the South. Many had worked with the French, and they feared Communist reprisals. Many expected that Diem, a Catholic, would favor them.

GEN. J. LAWTON COLLINS (U.S. envoy to South Vietnam): About 900,000 Catholics, under their village Catholic priests, moved from north to south. There was only a handful of people that moved south to north to get away from the Diem government. These refugees were settled by parishes in areas that were prepared for them by the South Vietnamese government. But they remained as Catholic enclaves. And, very much as the Southerners following our Civil War objected to the carpet-baggers that came from the North and took over a good many of the political posts in the South, so also the South Vietnamese strongly objected to the Diem adherents who came south.

NARRATOR: The refugees added to the confusion in the South, but Washington saw their value as a solid anti-Communist base for Diem, and as touching symbols of the Cold War.

NARRATOR: American agents assigned to the North used propaganda to spur the migration. Their chief, a veteran CIA specialist, was Colonel Edward Lansdale.

COLONEL EDWARD LANDSDALE: Some people were very reluctant about leaving home, so that the efforts on the propaganda were informative and also, uh, sort of urging them or nudging them real hard to come to a decision quickly, because there would be a period when free movement wouldn't be permitted.

So the orders to these people started turning into sharper and sharper form to get them to move and to overcome their reluctance at a time of great demoralization of the people.

NARRATOR: To signal the growing American commitment to Diem, President Eisenhower dispatched a new special envoy, his World War II colleague General J. Lawton Collins. Collins, instructed to help train an army for Diem, recommended \$100 million in aid for the new government.

GENERAL J. LAWTON COLLINS: Well, when I arrived in Saigon, it was chaotic. No question about that. The very day that I arrived the chief of staff of the Vietnamese Army, Hinh, was inveighing against Diem over a radio that was supported, as a matter of fact, by U.S. aid.

NGO DINH LUYEN: All through the night, command cars and machine gun carriers and army armored cars drove around and around the government palace.

GENERAL J. LAWTON COLLINS: Well I put a stop to that right off the bat, I can assure you. Hinh said he was going to stay on, and he hinted that he would start a rebellion. I assured him that if he did that, then all military aid to Vietnam would cease. And so finally, by putting pressure on Hinh, I got him to leave town in, oh, in about a week. And as a matter of fact, he never returned again.

NARRATOR: More challengers emerged from the chaos of South Vietnamese politics. Two of them headed armed religious factions. Another, backed by the French, was a former river pirate, now a notorious

gangster and opium dealer.

GENERAL J. LAWTON COLLINS: Bay Vien was his name. He controlled the secret police, mind you, of Vietnam. He also controlled all the houses of prostitution and the gambling joints, and this was the source of his strength.

NARRATOR: Bay Vien tried to make a deal with Diem, but Diem refused. In open defiance of the powerful gangster, he staged a symbolic burning of opium pipes. Then he attacked Bay Vien's headquarters -- located in Saigon's central police station.

NARRATOR: Diem's challenge seemed nearly suicidal to Collins. But Lansdale, now Diem's closest American adviser, believed in him.

COLONEL EDWARD LANSDALE: Diem was laughing at me. We were out on the front porch, and he said, "You are standing about where I think the first shell is going to hit and it's going to be coming in in about 20 minutes and you better get out of here; and I'm not initiating, I'm receiving here." And sure enough, 20 minutes later the firing broke out against him.

NARRATOR: Bay Vien's private army fought Diem's troops through the streets of Saigon. The risks for Diem were enormous. Unless he could consolidate his power, he would lose American support. He had already lost Collins.

GENERAL J. LAWTON COLLINS: I liked Diem, but I became convinced that he did not have the political knack, nor the strength of character, politically, to manage this bizarre collection of people in Vietnam.

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER, April 27, 1955:

We have called General Collins back here, a man in whom we've had the greatest of confidence and who has been right in the thick of things out there, and who had been supporting, of course, Premier Diem. Now there have occurred lots of difficulties. People have left the cabinet and so on; you know what most of those difficulties are. The strange...and it's almost an inexplicable situation, at least from our viewpoint.

NARRATOR: Diem prevailed.

Blocks of Saigon lay in ruins, but he had crushed his enemies. Their surrender was a personal triumph for him, but it set a dangerous pattern: distrustful and stubborn, Diem would never compromise. He would confront and defy all opposition.

JOHN FOSTER DULLES, May 1955:

And the government of Diem, which seemed to be...eh...almost on the ropes...uh...a few weeks ago, I think is reestablished with strength. Vietnam is now a free nation, at least the southern half of it is. And it's not got a puppet government, it's not got a government that we can give orders to and tell what we want it to do or we want it to refrain from doing. If it was that kind of a government, we wouldn't be justified in supporting it.

EVERETT BUMGARDNER (U.S. Information Agency): In the early days, just after his installation when he took over, we had this group of Americans, all of whom had tremendous ideas of how to further the efforts of the country, of how to get this thing rolling, of how to get the country started, get the government organized and formed and going.

Here you have a president, of the old cloth, who is quite formal, but having to put up with an endless stream of Americans taking up his time.

He didn't want to go out into the countryside; he didn't feel that the Vietnamese wanted to touch him, and see him, and be up close in the American style. We convinced him that he was not too well known and that Ho Chi Minh was very well known by everybody, and therefore that he should build up his popularity.

He made a series of long trips throughout the countryside, got big receptions. There was, of course, an organized clique to get them enthusiastic. And he began to believe in this, that this was a good public relations ploy, that he could succeed in being a popular president.

NARRATOR: Ho Chi Minh's followers believed the country-wide elections in 1956 would bring them to power in a reunified Vietnam. They had withdrawn their troops from the South, but the Geneva agreements

allowed their political organizers to remain there and rally support for Ho.

DR. PHAM THI XUAN QUE: I and my family were very happy and supportive of the Geneva agreement because we believed that there would not be any reprisal against the people who re-grouped to the North, and those who remained behind. We thought that in two years we would have a free and fair election in which the people could freely choose their own government.

NARRATOR: The U.S. had opposed the Geneva agreements, but pledged to respect them. Diem, who had condemned the accords, now resisted the nationwide election. Dulles has to decide what to do.

PAUL M. KATTENBURG (State Department aide): He sat very quietly; we all sat very quietly. I can recall distinctly the clock ticking away on his wall, and his breathing heavily as he read through the paper, turning to us, the few of us who were there at that meeting and saying...(imitates) "I don't believe Diem wants to hold elections; I believe we should support him in this."

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER:, 1967 Interview

There is this about it. At that time, we had a dictator that was now controlling more than half the country, and with a great deal of the population, and he would get a hundred percent of the vote!

NARRATOR: The Americans and Diem carried the day. There were no country-wide elections. Vietnam remained divided, and Washington welcomed Diem as a hero.

DIEM AND EISENHOWER, 1959:

Eisenhower: You have exemplified in your corner of the world patriotism of the highest order. You have brought to your great task of organizing your country the greatest of courage, the greatest of statesmanship. You are indeed welcome sir.

NARRATOR: Without American support, Diem would never have survived. With it, he seemed to have done the impossible. Washington held him up to the world as a model of anti-communism, the miracle man of Asia.

NARRATOR: Diem welcomed the weapons and the dollars, but he often resisted the Americans' advice. He was polite, but he was rigid and proud, and fiercely nationalistic.

EVERETT BUMGARDNER: I think he looked upon us as great big children -- well intentioned, powerful, with a lot of technical know-how, but not very sophisticated in dealing with him or his race, or his country's problems.

NARRATOR: During the late 1950s, Diem's problems grew. Like a traditional Vietnamese mandarin, he drew his small circle closer around him, relying on his family, especially his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and Nhu's wife. Their secret police, run by Nhu, set out to eliminate Communists and other dissidents.

LE MINH DAO: After the Vietminh army regrouped to the North and the Diem regime took over the South, repression began. Those of us who had directly fought against the French, and people who had helped organize the resistance against them, were the special targets of Diem's revenge.

DR. PHAM THI XUAN QUE: The manners of tortures inflicted upon these people by Ngo Dinh Diem and his hound dogs -- this was our term for the secret police -- were extremely inhumane. We were not Catholics; we only worshipped our ancestors. And so they forced us to throw the altar to the ancestors away and to become Catholics and to denounce the Communists.

EVERETT BUMGARDNER: They had, in some provinces, eliminated most of the stay-behind political agents, the ones that had exposed themselves and proselytized the people and began to complain against the government. But in doing this with this heavy-handed police apparatus that he had set up, they also harmed and incarcerated and eliminated a lot of people who were not involved with the Communist movement.

LE MINH DAO: As the Americans and Diem became more and more repressive, people started telling us we'd have to fight. They said we'd be wiped out if we kept to our plan of just political struggle.

NARRATOR (National Liberation Front Film)

This film marked a new phase of the struggle in the South, the formation in 1960 of the National Liberation Front, a Communist-organized coalition of anti-Diem forces.

Denied the election promised at Geneva, and nearly destroyed by Diem and Nhu's police, the Communist leadership and its southern supporters decided to go back to war. It would be, they said, a war of national liberation -- against Diem and against the American presence in Vietnam.

SOVIET PREMIER NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV, United Nations Speech, October 12, 1960:

You will not be able to strangle the voice of the people, which roars out and will go on sounding: Down with colonialism! The sooner we bury it, and the deeper, the better.

NARRATOR: At the U.N., Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev encouraged wars of national liberation. The new president took over in an atmosphere of grave threats and confrontation between East and West.

John Kennedy was in office only a few months when he suffered a humiliating defeat at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. Communist leader Fidel Castro crushed a secret American plan to oust him and then paraded his prisoners for the world to see. The invasion planning had begun before Kennedy took office and Eisenhower joined him during the crisis.

Soon, a badly shaken Kennedy faced questions on another war of national liberation -- in Vietnam.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY at press conference, May 1961:

The problem of troops is a matter, that -- and the matter of what we're going to do to assist Vietnam to retain its independence is a matter -- still under consideration. There are a good many...which I think can most usefully wait 'til we've had consultation with the government...which, up to the present time...which will be one of the matters which Vice President Johnson will deal with -- the problem of consultations with the government of Vietnam as to what further steps could most usefully be taken.

NARRATOR: Kennedy sent his vice president, Lyndon Johnson, to Saigon to reassure Diem. The U.S. seemed to be faltering, and Diem was worried. Johnson performed like a Texas politician on the campaign trail.

NETWORK NEWS, May 1961:

Johnson: Tell 'em that in the battle for Britain, when the clouds were over the little island of England, Churchill said, "We'll fight 'em in the alleys, in the streets..."

"News Commentator: On his tour around Saigon, Vice President Johnson has stopped his motorcade. He talks to just about anybody around. Now he's taking a ride in what's known as a "pedicab." Johnson really enjoys this kind of thing. Nothing fazes him; he tries everything.

AMBASSADOR FREDERICK NOLTING: President Kennedy was determined on this one because of a number of early setbacks -- the Bay of Pigs, to begin; the dressing-down, in effect, that he got from Khrushchev in the Vienna Conference when he first...when they first met each other... And finally, the Berlin Wall. So Vietnam was the point.

NARRATOR: Kennedy and his men saw themselves in a struggle with Khrushchev for the loyalty of new nations. To them, "national liberation" was code for "Communist aggression."

PRESIDENT KENNEDY at the U.N., September 25, 1961:

South Vietnam is already under attack. Sometimes by a single assassin. Some-times by a band of guerrillas. Recently by full battalions. The peaceful borders of Burma, Cambodia and India have been repeatedly violated. And the peaceful people of Laos are in danger of losing the independence they gained not so long ago. No one can call these wars of liberation. For these are free countries, living under their own governments. Nor are these aggressions any less real because men are knifed in their homes and not shot in the field of battle.

NARRATOR: In October 1961, two key Kennedy advisers, General Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow, arrived in Vietnam. Their visit coincided with a serious flood. They recommended a big increase in military aid,

including U.S. combat troops disguised as flood fighters.

Diem said no to the troops. He needed U.S. support, but he wanted to keep control, and he wanted to keep the foreigners out.

AMBASSADOR NOLTING: He feared an overwhelming American influence. That was one of the reasons he didn't want American combat forces. He was, to my mind, prescient in this, and said, in effect, he thought it would be a bonanza for the Vietcong.

NARRATOR: Kennedy, too, was reluctant to send ground troops, but he wanted to be tough. The answer for "little wars" -- guerrilla wars like South Vietnam's -- was counterinsurgency. Special forces, like the Green Berets, were sent to train the troops of threatened countries. They went in small numbers, but they brought with them the best of American military technology.

Counterinsurgency was stylish and exciting, and it suited JFK's needs perfectly. One of its strongest proponents was Kennedy aide Roger Hilsman.

ROGER HILSMAN: My idea was that the role of the special forces were to train Vietnamese to behave as guerrillas, harassing the supply lines down through the mountains of the Vietcong. And the special -- American special forces were to train their special forces to do that.

NARRATOR: The Communist-led movement in the South, now termed the Vietcong, had made big gains in 1961. With increased U.S. aid and the new counterinsurgency program, Kennedy raised America's ante. He would win this limited war -- with a few American advisers, a lot of American hardware, and a positive attitude...

CAPTAIN EDMOND FRICKE:

I feel that being humble and putting yourself in their position is the way to do it. I have gone out and helped them pick watermelons. I walk around with my bodyguard, he and I, and we go visit them and drink tea with them in their houses -- in their houses -- and this is an oddity to them because they, they can't imagine that an American can put himself in this position. So there-fore, it's going to be the man who can give them the most, show them that he...they can support them better that will win their confidence and win their support. And, as you know, it's the man who gets the support of this farmer who is going to eventually win this war.

SOUTH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT FILM, 1962:

Absolute loyalty to the fatherland and the President of the Republic of Vietnam...We swear to sacrifice ourselves to defend our country and the personalist republic regime.

NARRATOR: The ceremonies hid widening cracks inside the regime. In early 1962, two of Diem's own air force officers bombed the palace, hoping to topple the tightly-knit ruling family. Madame Nhu was injured.

MADAME NHU, 1963:

Just next to me was a bomb that had fallen. It was fat like this, just like a little pig. It hadn't exploded; it was just there. And I was just there, too.

Interviewer: Are you afraid of death?

Madame Nhu: Me? Oh, no, not at all...because in my country, death is always just around the corner. If you're afraid of it, you can't do anything.

NARRATOR: The Vietcong had assassinated 500 civilians and Diem officials, and killed 1,500 of his troops in the first half of 1961. VC influence in the country-side was growing.

Diem's brother, Nhu, encouraged by U.S. advisers, promoted a program to isolated peasants from the guerrillas. He ordered the construction of thousands of fortified villages, "strategic hamlets."

SOUTH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT FILM, 1962:

We are building strategic hamlets to bring peace throughout the country. This was their motto and their code of faith. Volunteers from every class and age, men and women and children, began the hard, physical work of construction. First they broke arable land to make the deep moats and the high fences... First came the moat around the entire village. The bamboo spikes, making an ancient but thoroughly efficient protection against invaders, have become the trademark of the strategic hamlets,

and each spike is cut and set by willing hands.

NARRATOR: In reality, life inside the spiky perimeter didn't measure up to the ideal. Diem's half-hearted land reform in the '50s had failed, and now the already resentful farmers were forced to relocate to the hamlets, which were targets for Vietcong attacks.

NARRATOR: Defense Secretary McNamara toured some hamlets with Ambassador Nolting in May 1962. Though American officials had private reservations about the program, McNamara publicly praised it.

The Americans were trying to be optimistic.

MAJOR ROBERT RYAN INTERVIEW, 1962:

Q: Major, how would you say the war was going in your sector?

A: Well, I think here, lately, the... it's going a lot better; I think we're beginning to win the people over; our operations are going better. We're actually getting VC.

Q: What evidence do you have that the... you're winning the people over?

A: Well, we've got the "strategic hamlet" program going on. And when we go out on these operations, it seems like the people are more friendly. Several times recently we've had people warn the Vietnamese troops that there was an ambush ahead, or something like that. This means the people are getting on our side.

KENNEDY PRESS CONFERENCE, December 12, 1962:

Q: It was just a year ago that you ordered stepped-up aid to Vietnam. Seems to be a good deal of discouragement about the progress. Can you give us your assessment?

A: No, we are putting in a major effort in Vietnam. As you know, we have uh, have about ten or 11 times as many men there as we had a year ago. They are... We've had a number of casualties. We've put in an awful lot of equipment. We've been going ahead with the strategic hamlet proposal. In some phases the military program has been quite successful. There is great difficulty, however, in fighting a guerrilla war; you need ten to one, or 11 to one, especially in terrain as difficult as South Vietnam. But I'm, uh... so we're not, uh... we don't see the end of the tunnel; but, I must say, I don't think it's darker than it was a year ago -- in some ways, lighter.

NARRATOR: But there was rising opposition to Diem's government, especially to his brother Nhu, who controlled the secret police and an elaborate intelligence network. Brilliant and eccentric, Nhu was at war not only with the Communists, but with all critics of the regime.

MADAME NHU: My husband, he was very unhappy with... on one side his brother, the other side, his wife. He considered both of us babes in the woods. He said to his brother, "You should be a monk," and "You," to me, "just keep quiet -- don't say anything."

NARRATOR: Vietnam had been a concern to the Kennedy Administration, but it was not a major concern. Suddenly, in the spring of 1963, it became a crisis. Buddhist groups, protesting that Diem's soldiers had killed eight worshippers while breaking up a gathering in Hue, began a series of demonstrations.

At first, Diem and his family did not take the Buddhists seriously.

NGO DINH LUYEN: My brother Diem, the president, never stopped giving aid and good advice to the Buddhists. He used to say to them, "Try to do something to reorganize your religion. As it is now, just about anyone can say he's a good Buddhist. All he has to do is shave his head and eyebrows and put on a robe."

NARRATOR: As the demonstrations grew, Diem rejected compromise and met the challengers with force. A Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, countered with a traditional act that horrified the West.

THICH TU HANH: The Reverend Quang Duc decided to dedicate his body as a torch to light the struggle to preserve religious teaching. I saw him step out of his car and assume the lotus position. Then a monk stepped forward and helped the Reverend pour gasoline on himself. At that moment, a flame engulfed his body.

NARRATOR: The photos hit the front pages in America and were on

Kennedy's desk in the morning. Quang Duc had become a martyr. Saigon students joined the Buddhists and the protests against Diem exploded.

THICH TU HANH: During the Reverend Quang Duc's cremation, everything was burned except for his heart, which remained intact. His heart was set on fire two more times, but it still did not burn.

MADAME NHU, 1963:

What have the Buddhist leaders done comparatively...the only thing they have done, they have barbecued one of their monks whom they have intoxicated, whom they have abused the confidence, and even that barbecuing was done not even with self-sufficient means because they used imported gasoline.

ROGER HILSMAN: The Buddhists bit, tasted a little political blood, bit harder, tasted more political blood, and then finally began to use American television. They would -- none of them spoke English but their signs were all in English.

And every time they planned a demonstration, or a Buddhist burned himself to death they would call up the American press, and they would appear and,...So they learned to use the American press media for political purposes; they learned how to develop political power as they went along.

NGO DINH NHU, 1963:

The Buddhist affair and the problems with the students were set up and orchestrated in such a way as to intoxicate public opinion here at home and abroad against the government of South Vietnam... because this government fights the Communists, and because it refuses to be a puppet government.

NARRATOR: In the convulsive summer of 1963, events raced far beyond Washington's control. The Buddhists became the rallying point for long-simmering opposition to Diem. Alarmed, Diem's senior army officers began to talk of ousting him. Ambassador Nolting stood by Diem.

AMBASSADOR NOLTING: I never felt that President Diem was a prisoner of his own family, or of any particular group, Roman Catholic or any other. I felt that he had a very difficult job to govern the country in a way which would not permit the Vietcong to take over.

NARRATOR: But Hilsman and others in Washington had decided that Diem and Nhu should go. Ambassador Nolting, Diem's ally, returned home.

The new ambassador was Henry Cabot Lodge, a Republican. Kennedy wanted bipartisan company in the Vietnam crisis.

NARRATOR: Diem and Nhu struck again at the Buddhists even before Lodge reached Saigon. Nhu's special forces raided the temples, sealed them shut, and arrested thousands of Buddhists. Diem's generals, increasingly frustrated, started to plot against the government.

GENERAL TRAN VAN DON: In the Vietnamese army, a majority of the soldiers were Buddhists. I am a Buddhist. I had a lot of trouble with my family, who reproached me for having attacked the pagodas. But it wasn't true. People were saying that the army staged the attacks, but actually it was units loyal to Diem who attacked the pagodas. But that doesn't matter. We were equally responsible. So then we had to do something to show Diem: either he had to change his policies, or we would have to change Mr. Diem.

LUCIEN CONEIN: I talked to, specifically to General Don, and I talked to other generals. And then this was the first indication that I had that there was really something serious going on -- that there was actually a coup, so to speak, being thought of by the senior officers of the Vietnamese army.

NARRATOR: The U.S. was now spending a million and a half dollars a day on the war. There were 16,000 American soldiers in South Vietnam, still called "advisers," but inevitably seeing action. The growing crisis in the cities threatened the Diem government and the whole war effort. The generals, through Conein, secretly asked Lodge for American support in their plot to topple Diem. Suspecting a coup, Diem and Nhu declared martial law. Lodge cabled Washington for instructions.

The prospect of a coup split the Kennedy ranks. But four top advisers took

the initiative, cabling Lodge to tell Diem to get rid of Nhu. If Diem refused, Lodge could tell the generals to go ahead.

HENRY CABOT LODGE: I brought up this question of getting Nhu out of the country, and he, he absolutely refused to discuss any of the things that I was instructed to discuss. And it gave me a little jolt, frankly. I think that when an ambassador goes to call on a chief of state and he has been instructed by the President to bring up certain things, the chief of state ought to at least talk about them.

MADAME NHU: Without him, the president would not be... I don't think that it would be easy for him to rule, to rule the country -- to govern the country. That's why when it was... requested... he was requested to... to send away my husband, he... he said, it was absolutely a stupid demand because he knew very well that my husband can do without him, but he, he could not do without my husband.

NARRATOR: The Buddhists continued their protests, and the tensions in Saigon now reverberated in Washington, where Kennedy still had doubts about a coup. The President wavered; then, in a television interview, he sent a subtle but sharp signal to Diem.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY INTERVIEW WITH WALTER CRONKITE,
September 2, 1963:

Kennedy: In the final analysis, it's their war. They're the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it -- the people of Vietnam against the Communists. We're prepared to continue to assist them, but I don't think that the war can be won unless the people support the effort, and in my opinion, in the last two months the government has gotten out of touch with the people.

Cronkite: Do you think that this government still has time to regain the support of the people?

Kennedy: Yes, I do. With changes in policy and, perhaps, with, in personnel, I think it can. If it doesn't make those changes, I would think that the chances of winning it would not be very good.

GEN. TRAN VAN DON: We wanted to be certain that if we succeeded with the coup we would have American support afterward, that the Americans agreed with us because we needed their aid to continue the war.

I asked Conein what the Americans thought. He said yes, the Americans agree.

LUCIEN CONEIN: I don't have any files on the dates of the conversation, or anything like that. So I don't really know at what point... I know that I gave them a green light prior to the coup -- upon the instruction of my government.

NARRATOR: Madame Nhu toured America, trying to rally support for the beleaguered regime. At the same time, Nhu hinted that he might make a deal with the Communists.

NGO DINH NHU, October 1963:

I am an anti-Communist from the point of view of doctrine. I am not an anti-Communist from the point of view of politics or humanity. I consider the Communists as brothers, lost sheep. I am not for a crusade against the Communists because we are a little country, and we only want to live in peace.

NARRATOR: On October 26, Vietnam's national day, Diem reviewed the troops.

HENRY CABOT LODGE: He knew that a coup was being planned. And he was -- I bet you he had every... every possible resource that he had at his disposal out trying to find out where they were and how to, how to destroy it.

NARRATOR: Lodge, through Conein, had signaled his approval of the generals' plan. But suspecting a double-cross, the generals refused to reveal the date for the coup.

It began on November 1.

HENRY CABOT LODGE INTERVIEW:

Lodge: And it was just a little after one when we heard the first shell go

off. And then we went up onto the roof and you could see the planes dropping bombs and you could see the troops starting to come down the street, and the thing was really on.

Q: Do you remember what your own feeling was at seeing all that?

Lodge: Well, my own feeling... Well, I'd sort of been living with it for, for many -- several weeks. So I can't say I was surprised. But of course, you're always -- it's always a very interesting thing to see, to see people shooting.

He [Diem] telephoned me, about four o'clock. And he said, "They've started the coup," and he said, "I want to know what the attitude of the United States Government is." "Well," I said, "it's four o'clock in the morning in Washington and I just, I don't know what the attitude is."

"Oh," he said, "you must have an idea." "No," I said, "I haven't." But I said, "I'm very alarmed about your personal safety, and I have taken steps so that you can be made titular chief of state in a new government, or that you can be flown out of the country to some safe place, or else," I said, "I, I offer you asylum here, in the residence."

He said, "No." He said, "I'm going to restore order."

MADAME NHU at press conference, Los Angeles, November 1963:

Q: Will you seek political asylum in this country if the coup is successful?

Mme. Nhu: Never!

Q: Why?

Mme. Nhu: No, because I... I cannot stay in a country of people who have stabbed my government in time of war.

Q: What news do you have of your husband?

Mme. Nhu: And first I do not think that it will succeed. You can be sure that I am sure that it will never succeed. News from my husband? I know ...I know only that he expected the coup.

Q: What of his welfare? Is he all right? Is he all right?

RADIO SAIGON, November 2, 1963:

You're tuned to the 8:20 AM spot, the 99.9 FM spot. This is AFRS Radio in Saigon. The time now is one o'clock. The American ambassador and the Commander of Military Assistance Command announce that all Americans are cautioned that a curfew from twenty hundred hours last night to zero seven hundred hours this morning is in effect for the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh area. For their own safety, Americans should stay off the streets, unless movement is absolutely necessary for conduct of official business.

NARRATOR: At three-thirty on the morning of November 2, the generals' infantry and tanks began their assault on the palace.

When they broke through, Diem and Nhu were gone.

MME. NHU, November 1963:

I tell you that if really the Ngo family have been treacherously killed, in that effect it will be only the beginning. The beginning of the story.

NARRATOR: As the soldiers sacked the palace, the generals searched for Diem and Nhu. Finally, they made contact and General Minh -- called "Big" Minh -- dispatched a convoy to get them.

GEN. TRAN VAN DON: One of the group who'd gone to get the two brothers, a general named Mai Huu Xuan, came to the door of the office, saluted and said to Big Minh: "Mission accomplished."

HENRY CABOT LODGE: Within minutes after he was killed I got the word. He and his brother left the palace -- the Gia Long Palace -- and went in this underground passageway to this Chinese merchant's house in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon. And in the morning they went into the Roman Catholic Chinese church, and when they came out there were armed men and an armored car, and they were pushed into the armored car and, I believe, shot inside the armored car.

ROGER HILSMAN: In a very real sense, the ultimate responsibility for the coup lay with President Ngo Dinh Diem, because he did things that we told him over and over again that if he did them we would have to publicly disapprove of them, and that this would encourage a coup. And he said, "I know." Now he went ahead and did them, and we had to publicly

disapprove of them. There was no choice.

MME. NHU: All that is... how do you say... arrogance, comes from arrogance. The U.S. was convinced it possessed the truth, and was full of contempt.

FREDERICK NOLTING: My own view was that, even at that point, we would have done much better to stick with the constitutional government, or at the very least, to have let them know that our policy was changing. I don't think it was fair, just or honorable to an ally of nine years, to do this behind his back.

NARRATOR: John F. Kennedy's government had been complicit in Diem's overthrow, and that complicity deepened America's involvement in Southeast Asia.

But Kennedy's death in Dallas only three weeks later overshadowed the assassinations in Saigon. It was left for the new president to discover what Kennedy, and Eisenhower, and Diem had created in South Vietnam.

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